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It's not TV, it's online drama: The return of the intimate screen

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Abstract

This article will focus on the subject of 'online drama', i.e. drama made specifically to be viewed on the Internet. It aims to investigate and account for this new and unique form of serialized drama, explain and clarify its historical origins, locate its generic characteristics and account for and understand its role in the contemporary media landscape. In particular, it will argue that online drama reveals much about the future of broadcasting as a whole and points the direction towards many of the fundamental changes that are taking place in the very aesthetics of contemporary 'television'. However, while some critics may argue that drama made for the Internet will simply offer another illustration of an increasingly digitized world, this investigation will focus on ways in which it may actually be seen to enhance the original power of early television – particularly its re-construction of 'the intimate screen'. In direct contrast to contemporary television's increasingly 'cinematic' sensibilities, this article will argue that it is online drama that can now most successfully recreate the psychological and emotional terrain of the small screen – reinventing the 'electronic theatre' for the new digital age.

Keywords

aesthetics, digital, Internet, online drama, television, webcam, YouTube

Introduction

Writing in 2002, Jeremy G. Butler complained that despite 'RealNetworks', Apple's and Microsoft's efforts, most users still have trouble watching video over the web. The image and sound is poor or choppy, and the video window is often very small' (2002: 44). This is one of the reasons why User Generated Content (UGC) sites like YouTube originally

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came into existence, using Adobe Flash Video technology to display a wide variety of content, including movie, TV and music video clips. The Flash Player was originally designed to display 2-dimensional vector animation, but soon become suitable for creating rich Internet applications and streaming video and audio online. With its simple interface, YouTube made it possible for anyone with an Internet connection to post a video to a worldwide audience, arguably turning passive viewers into active producers (see Hartley, 2009: 129–31). While much of the content on YouTube will be watched by only a small number of people (a large percentage is meant for less than a hundred viewers¹), recent attempts have aimed to attract a much wider audience by employing more complex storytelling techniques. In particular, a new form of ‘online drama’ (sometimes referred to as ‘Internet Drama’ or ‘Web Drama’) has taken the production of the moving image on the web into a new era of aesthetic and artistic sophistication.

Online drama is fiction specifically designed to be watched on the Internet. Beginning with amateur YouTube vlogs (video blogs) like ‘Emokid21’ (2006) and ‘Lonelygirl15’ (2006), this new type of digital story-telling has quickly evolved into an extremely popular and lucrative form of contemporary drama with ‘KateModern’ (2007) attracting an estimated 25 million viewers (see Carter, 2007). More recently, Joss Wheedon’s ‘Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog’ (2008) and Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick’s ‘Quarterlife’ (2007–8) have expanded the field further, with Wheedon’s tragic-comic musical winning several awards at the inaugural 2009 Streamy Awards for web television.² However, it is interesting to note that both these dramas were produced around the time of the WGA writer’s strike (from November 2007 to February 2008), which suggests that the Internet was a temporary replacement for another media. Rather than simply conceiving the use of the web as a means of distributing traditional media content (or for simply advertising television content online), this article will examine drama made particularly and exclusively for the web in mind, thereby exploring the new modes of engagement that have subsequently arisen out of this relatively recent phenomenon.³

In this article, I aim to show how online drama can be seen as a complex mixture of old and new broadcasting forms. On the one hand, it threatens to break down the borders of traditional media, challenging the well established analogue structures of ownership, control and revenue. Yet, I will also argue that the small screen aesthetics of this new mode of drama manages to tap into and revive earlier forms of representation – particularly those that are reminiscent of early television’s ‘intimate screen’.

From talking heads to home cinema

... cinematic values brought television spectacle, high-production values, and feature-style cinematography...It was as if the televisual producers packaged labels with their cinematic shows that read: ‘Panavision Shows That We Care’.

John Caldwell (1995: 12; emphasis in the original)

There was much discussion about the exact nature of television when it first arrived on the cultural scene in the 1930s. How precisely it differed from its competitors (particularly radio and cinema) produced much debate, both cultural critics and practitioners arguing over what the small screen could do most successfully. As Jason Jacobs reveals in *The*

Intimate Screen, the conclusion of many early commentators could be categorized under three broad headings (2000: 28):

1. The live immediacy is its defining characteristic: television is a means of instant transportation of material. The co-temporality of viewing and event signifies authenticity and realism.
2. Television is a medium of 'intimacy'; it is the delivery of images to the domestic sphere (as with radio broadcasting), and the visual 'closeness' described by the television close-up, that are the characteristic features of television. This intimate form of direct visual address to the viewer in the domestic (familial) home is sometimes seen to set up a new social/communal relationship...
3. Television is a hybrid medium... a combination of theatre, newsprint, radio and film: it can do all the things these other media can do, but with the advantage of 1 and 2.

Television's sense of intimacy was regarded as a particularly distinguishing feature of the new medium, especially in contrast to the conception of film as a 'cinema of attractions'. According to Tom Gunning, early cinema 'directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through visual spectacle...' (1991: 51). In contrast, Horace Newcomb argued that television is 'at its best when it offers us faces, reactions, explorations of emotions registered by human beings. The importance is not placed on the action...it is on the reaction of the action, to the human response' (1974: 246). To illustrate these differences, he suggests that the films of John Ford or Anthony Mann attempted to convey the sheer physical expanse of the Wild West, while on television the western genre concentrated on 'human problems'. For example, in *Have Gun – Will Travel* (CBS, 1957–63), 'Paladin's business card was thrust into the entire television screen, defining the meaning of the show as no panoramic shot could' (1974: 246).

Linked to this notion of intimacy, critics argued that sound generally played a greater role in television than it did in the cinema. This is not just because the cinema screen is bigger and therefore able to offer more in the way of visual detail and spectacle; it is because television also has to compete with the distractions of the domestic space. As John Ellis points out, television has to consistently remind the easily diverted viewer that something is happening on the screen. The short opening theme tune of a TV programme, for example, draws the viewer back to the set, pulling them away from the many interruptions within the home. TV's live transmission also meant that the relationship it built with its audience was of a 'co-present intimacy' (1982: 132), the set often talking straight to the viewer through a form of direct address. This domestic familiarity was emphasized through the medium's extended use of close-up, the small screen producing 'a face that approximates to normal size', thereby generating an increased sense of 'equality and even intimacy' (1982: 131). For Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956: 216), this illusion of intimacy produced a 'para-social interaction' between studio performers and domestic audiences, who were 'invited...to consider that they are involved in a face-to-face exchange rather than in passive observation'.

As television technology evolved, so these early aesthetics inevitably began to change. The introduction of new recording techniques, newer light-weight cameras and sound

technology meant that drama no longer had to be filmed live (or 'as live') or bound within the confines of a television studio. By the 1980s all decisions about editing could be made in post-production, while digital manipulation meant that the television image could become busier, more fragmented, and increasingly sophisticated. John Caldwell (1995) describes this as a new form of 'televisuality', particularly highlighting a type of 'videographic' image that allowed for increasing stylistic exhibitionism and visual self-consciousness. With the introduction of Home cinema, Wide/Plasma screens, High Definition, Surround Sound, DVD and Blu-ray, some critics even argued that the boundaries between cinema and television were increasingly merging. Television may have even driven to reflect these changes, producing shows that capitalized and enhanced its increasing technological capabilities. As Robin Nelson explains (2007: 111-2):

...even though the experience of a TV drama on digital television will perhaps never be the exact equivalent of a visit to the cinema, it is becoming a much closer approximation, close enough for TV drama producers increasingly to think cinematic... Indeed, writers and directors have been encouraged to be aspirational. More importantly, they have been supported with substantial budgets. Thus it is in a force-field that the circumstances for visual style on television production have arisen, with technological developments playing a significant part.

This new visual *mise-en-scène* is clearly detectable in the high production values commonly associated with the American cable channel HBO. Its famous tagline ('It's not TV. It's HBO') seemingly aiming to distance itself from the medium of which it is a part, while the channel's full title ('Home Box Office') suggests an implicit intention to bring 'cinema' to the domestic environment. Responsible for shows like *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), *Deadwood* (2004–2006), *Carnivàle* (2003–2005) and *True Blood* (2008–), critics have praised it for continually aspiring to reach beyond the usual limitations of network TV (see Leverette et al., 2008). Indeed, as a channel primarily funded by subscription, its drama can be made free of the pressures that usually determine commercial television, pushing its portrayal of sex, violence and profanity well beyond the normal network restrictions (see Kelso, 2008: 46–64). For Toby Miller, HBO's production values were also 'commensurately high – shooting on film, using long takes, filming at night, cameras on the move, single-camera production to permit multiple set-ups..' and so on (2008: x). Interestingly, the creator of *The Sopranos*, David Chase, professed to profoundly disliking the medium in which he worked. 'I don't watch television', he has explained. 'Not a single other show. Just *The Sopranos*' (cited by Stephen Armstrong, 2007: 16). This may help explain why he vowed to make every one of its episodes aspire 'to be a like a movie'.⁴

Although made by ABC, a drama like *Lost* (2004–2010) clearly reveals the 'HBO effect', the opening few minutes of its pilot episode revealing strong cinematic aspirations. Without any traditional credit sequence, the audience are quickly introduced to the horrific after-effects of a plane crash, producing 'some of the most harrowing and intense scenes ever dramatized for commercial television' (Mittell, 2008: 10). Filmed on a five day shoot on location in Oahu, Hawaii, its use of a real plane, handheld cameras, steadicam, blue screen, CGI special effects and real pyrogenics provides a visual spectacle with little dialogue for the first five minutes of screen time. Instead, the audience is simply provided

with non-diegetic music, particularly the crashing sound of drums (parts from the actual plane were included by the composer to produce a relevant 'soundscape').⁵ While frantic shouts and commands are clearly an important part of its opening *mise-en-scène*, the visual elements of the drama are paramount, coming to a climax with two dramatic explosions. Such is the scope of this opening sequence that for many on the set it no longer felt like making TV at all. As actor Dominic Monaghan explains, it 'felt like film...I thought at some point ABC was probably going to say, "let's try and release this at the cinema and turn it into a feature film"'. It was that grand in its scale and that ambitious'.⁶

Shot primarily on Super 35mm film, the distinctive look of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000–) is another example of a highly stylized piece of contemporary television drama.⁷ Rather than change the master negative in a film lab, its makers manipulate it by a computer software program that can alter the colour, contrasts, brightness and chromatic texture before it is transferred to High-Definition video prior to airing. As a result, the lighting in a scene often stands out as unnatural, sometimes bathed in electric blue, green or red tints, making 'full use of the chromatic separation of a video signal into three channels, either via component or HDMI [High-Definition Multimedia Interface] cables' (Cohan, 2008: 73). The series is also defined by its use of grainy, fuzzy effects, with a heavy manipulation of focus, speed and camera angles. Sets are frequently characterised by a large amount of 'glass, chrome, metal and other reflective surfaces' (see Lury, 2005: 46), giving a three-dimensional style to the drama as a whole. In particular, the look of the show has become associated with sequences now commonly known as 'CSI shots', when the camera appears to enter the body of a victim or reveal a microscopic piece of evidence in 'feats of micro-voyeurism' (see Cohan, 2008: 86). Employing 'a combination of models, periscope cameras, stop-motion cinematography, "snap-zoom", motion acceleration, layered CGI and digital colored timing' (2008: 51), these shots create what Mike Flaherty describes 'as a point of view we have never before seen on television' (cited by Cohan, 2008: 51). Director Danny Cannon argues that the drama's original philosophy was simple - 'if the sound on your TV went out, you would still be able to know what the story's about' (cited by Cohan, 2008: 50).

The tendency to 'think cinematic' has not influenced all television equally. As I argue below, Reality TV may be regarded as a reaction against the increased digitization of the television image. However, in drama there has arguably been a profound shift from the word-based aesthetic of the medium's formative years to an increasing emphasis on the 'look' of a show and its overall visual spectacle. Where once television was essentially a writer's medium (reflecting both its theatrical inheritance and its emphasis on sound and dialogue), in contemporary serial television the overall look of a show is generally overseen not by the writer but by other individuals in the production process. In particular, the importance of post-production manipulation means that the producer must now make sure each episode follows a similar visual style, particularly after shooting has taken place. As Caldwell argues, the 'intensive cinematic demands, frantic shooting schedules, high production values, and the need to maintain consistency of look and narrative texture across sixteen or twenty-four episodes per year (written by dozens of different writers and directed by many different episode directors) has led to a new authorial function "producer/director"' (2008: 17). Such a change in authorial focus would suggest an overall shift in style for contemporary TV drama, a move away from a primarily 'word-based' rhetoric to one that is clearly more visually orientated.

Cam culture: Intimate revelation

One of the internet's more popular innovations was the camera sited in someone's bedroom, allowing users to check out domestic banalities (with a promise of intimacies normally banned from broadcast TV) in real time, all done for nothing by private individuals in their own homes.

John Hartley (2008: 179)

As summarized by Jacobs (2000) above, TV's formative characteristics were essentially 'liveness', 'intimacy' and 'hybridity'. Perhaps surprisingly, these aesthetic forms can now be revealingly applied to a contemporary discussion of the Internet. Firstly, part of the fascination of the Internet lies exactly in its ability to connect people with other parts of the world through a 'live stream'. As Tara McPherson puts it, 'the web's liveness feels both mobile and driven by our own desires, structuring a mobilised liveness that we imagine we can invoke, and impact, with a simple, tactile mouse click' (2007: 179). Secondly, the Internet clearly produces an intense sense of 'intimacy'. Echoing Horace Newcomb (1974), Graham Roberts suggests that '...the camera needs to be close to the action (wide establishing shots and broad vistas look daft on a small viewer)...' (2004: 111). Finally, the Internet's status as a 'hybrid' medium is reflected in its complex, multitasking windows aesthetic that combines reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing of the web. As Henry Jenkins observes, a 'teenager doing homework may juggle four or five windows, scanning the web, listening to and downloading MP3 files, chatting with friends, wordprocessing a paper and responding to email, shifting rapidly between tasks' (2004: 34).

These three major aesthetic characteristics were clearly recognizable in 'JenniCam', one of the earliest examples of a webcam site which allowed Internet users to constantly observe the intimate daily life of an individual live online. Jennifer Kaye Ringley began her site in April 1996 when she installed a webcam in her dorm room at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania.⁸ When she moved to Washington, D.C. in 1998, she also added webcams to cover her additional living space and began charging access to her site for individuals who desired certain privileges, seeing her nude or engaging in sexual behaviour. For many critics, the site was little more than a disturbing case of mass voyeurism, an exercise in crude titillation that epitomized the dangerous breakdown of the private and public sphere. In contrast, critics like Simon Firth (1998) argued that it offered 'us a new and unfamiliar aesthetic – one that is, like all interesting art, visually fascinating, disconcertingly erotic and a provocative reflection of ourselves'. Regarded by some as a 'conceptual artist', Ringley viewed it simply as a straight-forward document of her life, hence her refusal to have it edited in any form. For many, it was clearly a new form of 'soap opera', its real life/real time aesthetics offering something more 'authentic' than the fictional sensationalism of its television equivalent. As Barry Smith (2005: 96) points out, '...a young female "star", a love interest, a sex interest even – this was webcam meets Hollywood (or at least, daytime soap opera)'.

What is interesting about the Ringley case is just how intensely intimate the use of the webcam quickly became. Indeed, the connection between pornography and the Internet may actually give us a clue to understanding its aesthetic appeal to millions of users.

Whilst television is most commonly associated with the family space of the communal living room, the webcam is strongly connected with the even more personal space of the bedroom and the lone viewer – further re-enforcing its connection with the private and the extremely personal. In terms of its *mise-en-scène*, the ‘rawness’ of the webcam image might also seem more ‘real’ than the polished images of digital TV, cinema or DVD. If the representation itself seems ‘real’, then the events witnessed consequently seem to be less of a ‘performance’ – arguably a crucial requirement to the enjoyment of pornography and eroticism.

An example of these intimate aesthetics can also be found in many of the amateur videos that first appeared online. In 2004 Gary Brolsma uploaded a video of himself ‘chair dancing’ to O-Zone’s ‘Dragostea Din Tei’ (a Romanian-language pop song known affectionately as ‘The Numa Numa Song’) which created an Internet phenomenon. This viral video was the start of a ‘Numa Numa Dance’ craze which has since spawned over 58,000 parody videos, including those created for the ‘New Numa Contest’ which offered US\$45,000 in prize money for submissions.⁹ This is perhaps surprising considering that the quality of the original video was relatively poor, there appears to have been no editing, the webcam does not move and there has been no post-production manipulation of the image. However, there is something so intensely intimate about the Brolsma image that it made a connection with millions of users around the world. As Douglas Wolk (2006) puts it:

Brolsma’s video singlehandedly justifies the existence of webcams. His squarish head and shoulders are in the center of the shot. He’s got a short haircut, glasses that are slightly too small for him and reflect his computer’s monitor, and cheap headphones; he’s sitting in a dismal-looking suburban room. And he is *going for it*: rolling his eyes back in his head, shaking his face, shooting his hands into the air with the beat, saluting along with the word *salut*, gesturing grandly, lip-synching the whole thing with his grand opera of a mouth, flirting with the camera, utterly given over to the music. It’s a movie of someone who is having the time of his life, wants to share his joy with everyone, and doesn’t care what anyone else thinks.

In many ways, the Brolsma phenomenon is akin to the popularity of watching ‘ordinary people’ in ‘real’ situations on television. As Arild Fetveit suggests, Reality TV can partly be understood as an attempt to return the moving image to a world before the digital media, arguing that ‘...the proliferation of reality TV could be understood as an [sic] euphoric effort to reclaim what seems to be lost after digitalisation....’ (1999: 798). Indeed, *Big Brother* (Endemol, 1999–) could be perceived as the logical continuation of ‘JenniCam’ – ordinary people filmed in real time, in everyday habitats and viewed through aesthetically diminished images. However, I would argue that the low-grade *mise-en-scène* embedded in the webcam image seems to go even further than is generally possible on television, Ringley’s website offering a completely unedited filmed account of her day to day life. Similarly, Brolsma is not a self-conscious auditioner for the latest series of *American Idol* (Fox, 2002–) or even a contestant talking to ‘Big Brother’ in the Diary Room, but is a lone individual in the comfort of his own (generally unobserved) private environment.

This, then, is a glimpse into a world of intimate revelation, of the sort that has seldom been witnessed on TV – at least, without it being carefully edited, narrated or

manipulated in one form or another. It is precisely, I would argue, the profound intimacy of the image that seems so voyeuristically attractive to audiences, the close-up of Broolsma's face offering the viewer an intimate glimpse into an emotional landscape rarely permitted in day-to-day life. Although Milly Buonanno has TV in mind when she discusses the role of the close-up on the small screen, her account would seem to apply even more intensely to the experience of watching the web (2008: 40):

We see tears welling up and flowing, we perceive unchecked reactions, we guess that someone has had a facelift, sometimes we move closer to the screen to have a better look at a detail, if for no other reason than to experience the pleasure of staring unseen at a stranger without having to feel embarrassed by our impertinence.

Seen in this light, the 'homemade' aesthetic of many webcam images manage to tap into and revive earlier analogue forms of representation. Yet, while television tended to make a name for itself by broadcasting important events live (such as the Queen's Coronation, the Moon landing or even a football match), the webcam seems to celebrate capturing the mundane and the trivial (a coffee pot, San Francisco fog or just the close-up of a badly lit face in a suburban bedroom). It is as if the very triviality of the event itself somehow enriches its authenticity, giving the viewer precisely what they can no longer see on TV – a glimpse into the 'real world' of 'authentic' feeling and emotion. Like other viral videos of its kind, it is unlikely that Broolsma's dance would have been caught by anything other than a webcam, a piece of technology so everyday, so habitual and so intensely domestic in nature that it clearly facilitated in recording the subject's overwhelming lack of self-consciousness. As the makers of the 'Hey Clip' viral video explain, '...I keep asking people why do they like it, and they say, "Because it's reality". You see it's homemade...' (Kornblum, 2006). 26.¹⁰ If television has long since relinquished its claim to offer a transparent 'window on the world', then the webcam seems to have picked up its mantle and is taking its audience on a journey into secret worlds – quite literally in the case of the Mars Pathfinder, but also into the private and normally hidden realm of the domestic space.

Cam fiction: Serial intimacy

The webcam characteristics outlined above were clearly apparent and developed in the first generally recognized online 'drama' produced in the spring of 2006, a vlog posted on YouTube from an American teenager calling himself 'Emokid21'. Claiming to be from 'Clewie' (Cleveland, Ohio), the subject was dressed in the obligatory hooded sweatshirt and appeared predictably whiny, self-obsessed and painfully earnest. 'Emo', he tells his audience, 'is from the heart, ok? It's from the heart, man'. However, six days later he received a response from a female calling herself 'Emogirl21'. What unfolded, over the course of a month, was an unlikely love story between the two. As a result, thousands of people started to tune into YouTube to watch their courtship unravel, the two quickly receiving a great deal of attention, not all of it positive.¹¹ However, in April 2006 'Emokid21's' real MySpace profile was found and his hidden identity was revealed. He was not actually an American teenager at all, but Benjamin Castelow Johnson, a 22-year-old young English college student from Rugby in the UK. He and

his collaborators were forced to admit they were acting their parts; the romantic saga finally coming to an end with one last video on YouTube entitled 'The Death of EmoKid21Ohio'.

What came next on YouTube is generally recognized as the first fictional drama to be made for and watched exclusively online. Consisting of daily instalments of only a few minutes long, 'Lonelygirl15' first appeared on YouTube on 16 June 2006 and went onto to receive more than 110 million combined views (see Davis, 2006: 238). The drama's narrative revolved around the central performance of a young woman whose YouTube username provided its title. In fact, like the earlier 'drama', much of its audience initially believed her to be a real vlogger called Bree. This was not surprising as the videos were deliberately made to resemble thousands of others, its female protagonist also posting replies to and dropping the names of other popular YouTubers in her videos. Learning from the mistake of 'Emokid21', a fake page was also set up in her 'MySpace' account where she began corresponding with her audience. This not only aided the sense of involvement that its audience felt for her, but also helped the drama to appear as an essentially organic creation. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green explain (2009: 28-9):

...it was the embeddedness within YouTube's social network of each character in the Lonelygirl15 universe that marked the videos as authentic: characters in the series used their own YouTube profiles and videos to introduce themselves and carry the narrative, as well as forging connections across other social networking sites such as MySpace. Bree, Daniel, and other characters were made real not only through the skills of writers and actors, but also through their apparent use of YouTube to create and negotiate social relationships with other participants in the social network.

As Bree's story unfolded so it quickly evolved into a bizarre narrative that portrayed her dealings with secret occult practices, involving the mysterious disappearance of her parents after she refused to attend a secret ceremony. Needless to say, it was eventually revealed as a piece of Internet drama and its central character was exposed as a 20-year-old New Zealand actress called Jessica Rose. The identities of her secret collaborators were Ramesh Flinders (a screenwriter and filmmaker), Miles Beckett (a doctor-turned-filmmaker) and Greg Goodfried (a former attorney). In their first interview with the media, the three video makers said they were amazed by the reaction to their creation. 'We did this with zero resources. Anybody could do what we did....'. The sum total of the equipment they used was two 'desk lamps (one broken), an open window and a \$130 camera' (cited by Rushfield and Hoffman, 2006). Yet, what is important to note here, is that the drama still attracted an extraordinary large number of hits, even after the revelation that the events were fictional.

It is no surprise, then, that the makers of 'Lonelygirl15' wanted to develop this success and a spin-off show soon followed called 'KateModern'.¹² Commissioned by the social networking site Bebo, each of 'KateModern's' episodes were four minutes long and shown daily, viewed via its own profile page and also distributed on MySpace and YouTube 24 hours later. The idea was to make the content widely available, then draw the audience back to Bebo to let its viewers interact about the show, thereby keeping their advertisers happy. This approach to distribution, marketing and revenue was subsequently an approach copied by future online drama. According to its official

website, 'Quarterlife' went even further by being the first to create its own social networking website, quarterlife.com.¹³

Online drama is now widespread across the Internet, with different social networking sites and even television channels getting involved. The British soap opera *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–) recently produced its own online spin-off, 'EastEnders: E20', which aired between 8 and 25 January 2010. Lasting between three and 16 minutes each in length, the 12 episodes were made available via the *EastEnders*' official website with omnibus editions available on BBC iPlayer and BBC Red Button. Coca Cola Europe has also produced 'Green Eyed World' (2009), a fake reality drama (consisting of one five minute episode per week) following London pop singer Katie Vogel. It aired on YouTube and tracked Katie's life, relationships and her music career, using Facebook as its main place of interactivity. While watching the videos viewers could even comment or vote on what was happening, creating a dialogue between themselves, their friends and Katie. As Bebo's 'International President' explains, the need to make its users actively involved in the drama was seen as a crucial element to online drama's success. 'The strength of Bebo', she explained, 'is that it offers instant feedback from a built-in forum of interested and committed users eager not just to consume content but to actively get involved, so we can satisfy the level of involvement younger audiences now expect' (Shields, cited in Carter, 2007).

In many ways, then, online drama reveals all the aspects about the future of broadcasting that you would expect from drama designed specifically for the Internet. In particular, it involves an acute awareness of its potential for interactivity among its audience, not only allowing users to watch content when they want but also influence the very making of the content itself. 'It was a question of how we use the platform,' says Miles Beckett, one of the creators of 'KateModern'. 'We have quizzes on the characters, blogs as part of narrative, whiteboard drawings that become important later in the story – everything we do feeds back into the narrative. It's totally interactive – that's what people expect now' (cited by Author Unknown, 2008). As this suggests, online drama is clearly an example of a new kind of media content, one which reflects the audience's ever-growing capacity to become part of the process of production. As Ashley Highfield (the then director of BBC New Media & Technology) explains, this is clearly an aspect of the future of television as a whole (cited in Jenkins, 2006: 242):

Future TV may be unrecognizable from today, defined not just by linear TV channels, packaged and scheduled by television executives, but instead will resemble more of a kaleidoscope, thousands of streams of content, some indistinguishable as actual channels. These streams will mix together broadcaster's content and programs, and our viewer's contributions. At its simplest level – audiences will want to organize content the way they want it. They'll add comments to our programs, vote on them, and generally mess about with them. But at another level, audiences will want to create these streams of videos themselves from scratch, with or without our help. At the end of the spectrum, the traditional 'monologue broadcaster' to 'grateful viewer' relationship will break down.

The way online drama is financed may also reveal interesting developments in terms of the future of broadcasting. As viewing television on the Internet means that traditional forms of advertising have become increasingly difficult to employ (conventional advertisements are simply easier to avoid), so online drama has begun to look towards

new forms of funding. Reflecting the more relaxed regulations online, product placement has become particularly attractive to its makers. Everything from Microsoft maps to Orange mobile phones are on display, each company paying up to £250,000 to have their names integrated into a storyline. As this suggests, online drama threatens to break down the borders of older media, challenging the traditional structures of broadcasting. 'Some are saying this could be the future of broadcasting – for the younger audience, at least', says Mark Boyd, head of content at advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty. 'The old TV model was great content, watched by lots of people, monetarised by brands. What Bebo is now doing is no different. As their audiences grow, the volume of content commissioned from scratch by social networks can only increase' (cited by Carter, 2007).

Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that online drama reveals only aspects that concern the future of television. As outlined above, there are important characteristics of the Internet that ironically echo television's earlier aesthetic form. Starting with 'Emokid21', it is easy to see how its new media credentials were 'anchored' by more traditional televisual techniques. First, the domestic space used in the narrative (i.e. the bedroom), offered a sense of everyday ordinariness reminiscent of soap opera whose settings are usually 'commonplace and recognisable' (Jordan, 1981: 28). Second, the extensive use of close-up (often extreme) on the webcam also replicated soap's tendency towards intimacy. Characters were also emotionally open (see Brown, 1994: 48), tapping into the genre's uncanny potential to offer a form of 'emotional realism' (see Ang, 1985), hence their decision to mock but also utilize the contemporary figure of the 'Emo' ('Emo' is short for 'Emotional Hardcore', a musical subgenre of hardcore punk music). Finally, its use of serialization (it took six days for Emogirl to reply to the first message from Emokid) meant that it allowed as many people as possible to watch it and for a realistic amount of time to pass between the messages, i.e. adding to its accumulating sense of authenticity by employing a 'use of time which parallels actual time' (Ang, 1985). In this way, 'Emokid21's amateur aesthetic was counter-balanced by quite a complex understanding of televisual structures, producing a surprisingly sophisticated 'micro-soap' in the process.

This serial intimacy is also clearly present in the aesthetic construction of 'Lonelygirl15'. The entire three minutes of an early 'webisode' ('My First Kiss') consists almost entirely of a head and shoulders shot of Bree staring into her 'webcam' from her computer chair. The only time she is not in close-up is in brief moments when she disappears from view in mock embarrassment (comically asking her audience out of shot, 'are you still there?') or when she plays with her soft toys on her bed in a speeded up sequence to suggest moments of killing time. So, for the majority of the time she stares straight at the viewer, speaking directly to them, creating a powerful eye-line match between her and her audience – thus constructing an intense sense of 'equality and intimacy' (Ellis, 1982: 131). Such techniques are clearly meant to also suggest an intensely 'confessional' space, Bree reluctant to tell her audience who she has kissed but almost being forced to by the unrelenting 'gaze' of the camera and the audience (hence her need to occasionally hide from view). In this way, 'Lonelygirl15' clearly relied on a conversational mode of storytelling, focusing on the psychological and emotional terrain of Bree's world and allowing the audience unique access into her personal (intimate) thoughts from the private world of her bedroom (a personal space unpopulated by the authority of her parents).

After the real identity of Bree was exposed, 'Lonelygirl15's' popularity continued to grow and the drama became increasingly more complex. However, even when a shaky hand-held camera finally replaced the static camera of the earlier instalments, the focus of the show was still primarily centred on the revelation and display of each character's inner feelings and emotions through the ubiquitous use of close-up and confessional monologues to screen. Although action sequences were increasingly added and intense moments of revelation and suspense included, Bree still frequently looked straight into the camera in close-up whilst talking directly to her audience – making it drama at its most intimate and most personal. Although its editing was surprisingly slick – it used a good deal of non-diegetic music and it frequently manipulated its image (such as the use of freeze frame and speeded up sequences) – it was clearly 'cam fiction' that was very deliberately exploiting the intimate and 'para-social' dynamics of the medium for which it was exclusively made.

Costing £6,000 per instalment (a fraction of the budget of a conventional TV drama), 'KateModern' was primarily told through a similar format which retained each actor's direct address to the viewer through close-up. In the webisode 'Spiders', for example, we see two men embarking on a new business venture. They take a digital camera with them, explaining that they 'want to capture every moment from the beginning'. Each takes a turn at filming the other, the camera itself clearly being used as a means of confessional, the use of close-up allowing the audience to quickly get to know these two characters and their particular story in intimate detail. Consequently, the episode has a primarily 'homemade' feel to it, its *mise-en-scène* perhaps even reflecting the 'amateurishness' of these inexperienced business people (like *The Apprentice* [NBC, 2004–] but with its candidates even more inept than usual). In this way, it pushed the limits of what could be done with online drama (moving away from the domestic space and the 'webcam') but also retaining its underlining utilization of intimate and personal space. The serial's ability to bring viewers back was also produced in classic serial form by providing its audience with a tantalizing cliff-hanger at the end of season one, the death of its central character. This is a classic serial TV technique, clearly reminiscent of the famous 'Who shot JR?' plot line of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–91) or the 'Who Killed Laura Palmer?' of *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–91).

Although online dramas are clearly becoming more sophisticated and are now not always shot on a webcam, it is arguable that the small screen dynamics on which the material is intended to be watched will continue to dictate the general aesthetics of the content produced. Even in 'Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog' there is still an emphasis on the close-up, direct address and intimate revelation. For almost the first four minutes of its opening, its protagonist simply talks directly to his audience, reading emails and discussing his macabre plans. Although the first song is partly shot in a Laundromat in flashback, the audience is still given intermittent head and shoulder shots of Harris in his laboratory singing to a static camera.¹⁴ As this suggests, the makers of online dramas still continue to recognize that the very limitations of their productions may well construct an intimacy and familiarity few media can now equal.

In particular, online drama's immediacy (broadcast as daily or weekly episodes and its mimicking of 'real time'), its utilization of domestic and everyday settings (most commonly the one room interior of a house), its tendency towards dialogue over visual

spectacle (characters directly addressing the audience through a single camera) and its emphasis on the close ups of the human face (often via a webcam), associates it more with the aesthetics of early television drama than with the highly manipulated image of contemporary digital television. If, as Jacobs argues, early television drama was built on the 'revelation and display of the character's inner feelings and emotions, effected by a close-up style...' (2000: 7), then this new 'small screen' is fighting back against contemporary television's increasingly 'cinematic' aspirations.

Conclusion

The development of the moving image online can still be seen as a new transformation of 'television' aesthetics. They may not offer traditional televisual content as we know it, but they can still be understood as part of its continued historical development. In particular, this online image may be seen partly as a reaction against the increasingly 'professional' quality of the digitized screen, the webcam aesthetic inspiring the Internet to try and reclaim the original intimacy of television by returning it back to the low-grade 'liveness' of the early medium. Going further than Reality TV, it reveals a quality that implicitly harnesses an older and more 'primitive' aesthetic, seemingly revelling in content that rejects the visual spectacle of digital technology. In this sense, the pc and laptop can now be regarded as the new small screen, a form of personal 'TV' that seems dramatically at odds with television's new 'cinematic look'; producing a fresh medium for the construction of private and personal content at the click of a mouse.

Seen in this context, online drama can be understood as a complex mixture of old and new broadcasting forms. On the one hand, these serials appear to be taking their audience into the new brave new world of small screen interactivity and increased forms of 'participatory culture' (see Jenkins, 2006: 3). Yet, their stripped down and 'homemade' aesthetic also manages to tap into and revive earlier analogue forms of representation; particularly their ability to offer a private and personal 'window on the world'. In direct contrast to the convergence aesthetics of contemporary television's 'Home Cinema', it is ironically online drama that can now most successfully recreate the psychological and emotional terrain of the 'intimate screen' – reinventing the 'electronic theatre' for the new digital age.

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Notes

- 1 See Michael Wesch (2008), 'An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube', presented at the Library of Congress, June 23. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4_hU (last accessed March, 2010).
- 2 The Streamy Awards are presented annually by the International Academy of Web Television (IAWTV) to recognize excellence in the arts and science of web television production, including directing, acting, producing, and writing.

- 3 As Virginia Heffernan (2008), puts it, '[d]uring the Hollywood writers' strike last fall, new online serials popped up everywhere. In protesting how little money they made online, writers refused to work for movies and TV. They did, however, write for the web — and more than one press release suggested that the talent of the pros would finally enliven the form. The strike came and went, and I saw some funny one-offs, but no series that rivaled 'lonelygirl15'.'
- 4 Bogdanovich, Peter (2002) 'David Chase interview', bonus feature in *The Sopranos: The Complete First Season* DVD box set, HBO video.
- 5 See 'Welcome to Oahu: The Making of the Pilot – Behind the scenes featurette on *Lost's* premier episode' on *Lost: The Complete First Series*, Bonus Features.
- 6 Cited from 'Fire & Water: Anatomy of an Episode' from *Lost: The Complete Second Series* DVD box set, Bonus Features.
- 7 Film director Quentin Tarantino even directed a *CSI* two-parter (see *Grave Danger*, first aired on May 19, 2005).
- 8 At this stage in the development of the webcam, the image would still automatically refresh only every three minutes, but gradually the technology improved so that the site could eventually produce a live stream.
- 9 See <http://www.newnuma.com/Brolsma> was also No. 1 on VH1's Top 40 'Internet Superstars' and appeared on ABC's *Good Morning America* (ABC, 1975–) and NBC's *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC, 1992–).
- 10 An early hit on YouTube was the 'Hey Clip' which had Lital Mizel and her friend Adi Frimerman lip-synch and dance to The Pixies song 'Hey'. Unlike Brolsma's video it was carefully edited and clearly shot in several takes, but still the 'authenticity' of the setting (the ubiquitous bedroom) and its aesthetic made it a huge hit.
- 11 As a result, CBS News and MTVu (MTV's college-themed website) tried to contact the pair in order to discuss their story and the topic of bullying (see Netburn, 2007).
- 12 Running from July 2007 through until June 2008, the serial even contained well-known British actor Ralph Little.
- 13 Each part of the series premiered nearly simultaneously on MySpace and the official Quarterlife site. It apparently produced the third-highest views of any scripted series in Myspace history. In five months, the total online views for the series were over 9 million (see Heffernan, 2008).
- 14 The drama does get more aesthetically complex as it continues, but this opening section clearly taps into and pays homage to earlier forms of online drama. This opening format is also returned to at different points of the narrative, acting as an 'anchor' to other more complex sequence.

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